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Interview with Marceline Birchenough

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Marceline Birchenough

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH MARCELINE BIRCHENOUGH

Miss Marceline Piehler began her teaching career in the fall of 1943 in the one-teacher country school located a mile west of the tiny village of Pollard, Kansas. Life's circumstances, teacher education classes at Sterling College in Sterling, Kansas, and a week-long County Teachers Institute prepared her for her first teaching assignment. Miss Piehler's family was probably an influence toward her becoming a teacher. Marceline related that her father was an excellent teacher and a good disciplinarian who came from a family with many teachers. He had a love and an excellent memory for poetry. Mr. Piehler had also been the principal at the elementary school where she had attended. He did *not* want Marceline to become a teacher, but, no doubt, his role model influenced her career choice.

The teacher preparation at Sterling College was a two-year program that consisted of sixty credit hours of coursework. She could have taught on a thirty-hour certificate, but she said she never considered that option. Student-teaching was also a part of that two-year program, but Miss Piehler indicated that her student-teaching experience in Sterling Elementary was limited to mainly observations and some one-on-one student-teacher to student situations. When she was the supervising teacher for student-teachers many years later, she tried to provide her student-teachers with a more complete and true picture of teaching.

The final preparation for her first year of teaching was the week of County Institute held in Lyons. Meetings and lectures were held to ready the many country schoolteachers in the county for their multiple duties as a one-room country schoolteacher. In her book, The Teacher Rode a Bicycle, (Birchenough, 1979) Miss Piehler recalled the closing words of County

Institute that year. "After we had received our big cardboard box of supplies of grade book, report cards, and fire drill reports from the county superintendent, we were admonished to go forth and teach fearlessly because 'they will learn in spite of you'."

Marceline's father, a teacher at a nearby country school, had heard of the vacant position at the Pollard School. An interview was arranged with the school board who was in charge of hiring a teacher. Marceline was hired for the eight-month position which paid \$90 a month. The job involved teaching all subjects for all eight grades, doing the janitor duties, preparing hot lunches, personally providing her own textbooks, and attending the State Teachers' Meeting at her own expense. Purchasing textbooks and attending the yearly teachers' meeting often created a financial strain for the beginning teacher.

In comparison to a present-day teaching position, (Birchenough, 1979) virtually no benefits were offered to the country teacher at that time. "There was no health insurance, no salary protection plan, no sick nor personal leaves, no physical education, art, band, daily music, psychologists, reading experts, disability teachers nor health nurses. We did have a teacher retirement and income deduction withholding."

During the years of World War II, the teaching profession was influenced by world conditions. Many male teachers were joining the military. Out of necessity, the vacancies were sometimes filled with married female teachers whose husbands were involved in the war effort. In years prior to the war, it had been somewhat unusual for a female teacher to be married. World War II caused that policy to change. Many female teachers in the area were married. Contracts were sometimes broken when a female

teacher had an opportunity to accompany her military husband to another area.

Also, one-room country school teachers may have enjoyed a little extra leverage during this time because of their scarcity and value to the school. If a sick or injured country teacher was not able to teach for a time, the school was usually closed. When Marceline was injured in a car accident during that first fall of teaching, the school was closed for two weeks to allow her back injury to heal. She felt that the community appreciated her as a teacher.

Individual salary negotiations were also possible for country schoolteachers. The teacher could ask the school board for increases based on skills and experience. A teacher who could teach music often received a salary of over \$100 a month.

At that time, Pollard was tiny farming settlement. A grain elevator and a machine repair shop were the businesses of the village. The nearby machine shop was a gathering place where men would visit. Coarse language was frequently used there, and Marceline said it was not a place that she would have been comfortable entering. The two owners, "Shorty" Trowbridge and Glen Truesdell, were the fathers of three of her students and also school board members.

The director of the school board, Orville Evans, was a very upstanding farmer in the area. This family had two students attending Pollard School at that time.

Another farm family in the area, the Buckbees, also had two students in school. These students were first and second graders and the parents were not on the school board.

A church was not a part of this immediate area, nor were there any other businesses at the time. The Kansas Midland Railway passed through on the east between the tiny town and K14 Highway. In its very early days, the town had supported a depot, a general store, and a post office.

Farming was an important influence on the school's schedule and students. Like many other country schools in the area, this was an eight-month school; town schools and school with more than one teacher usually met for nine months. The shortened schedule of the country schools allowed the students to give more of their time to farmwork. The morning start time for this school was also adjusted an hour earlier in the fall giving the students an extra hour in the afternoon to do fieldwork and chores.

Miss Piehler found room and board with a widow, Mrs. Alma Rickard, and her grown son, Lowell for \$20 a month. The house was old and had few modern amenities. Marceline's room was unheated with another unheated room between her room and the heated living quarters. The bathroom was an outdoor "Eleanor". The "Eleanor's" were wooden outhouses built on concrete bases with a toilet lid. This replacement of the hand-dug privy was a rural sanitation project promoted by Eleanor Roosevelt. These structures were often built with WPA labor during depression.

Marceline remembers Mrs. Rickard as an excellent cook who could expertly regulate a wood cookstove. Monday through Friday, Alma prepared two meals and packed a lunch for the schoolteacher whom she treated as a daughter. On Fridays after school, Marceline would leave the Rickard household. She went to her parents' home for the weekend and attended church on Sundays at Ebenezer Methodist Church located west of Lyons. Since she had no car and her fiancée was in the service, these weekends were her main outings away from the Pollard area.

The school was a one-room wooden building located west of Pollard. This school was only a few years old because the former schoolhouse had been destroyed by fire a few years earlier. The main part of the building was a classroom measuring about twenty-five feet by twenty feet. A tiny storage closet and a coat area were located just inside the east entrance of the school. South windows with venetian blinds provided good lighting and ventilation. A small stage and blackboards were at the west end, a piano on the north, and bookcases completed the room. The teacher preferred to keep her desk at the back of the room so that she could see what was happening in the room.

Heating the building was accomplished via a coal-burning furnace in the full basement accessed from outside stairs. A large table, a coal bin, and an area for kindling were also located in the basement. The school building was equipped with electricity, and a one-burner electric hot plate was used in the basement to prepare the hot lunches.

The outdoor pump with a cast-iron handle served as the water supply. A bucket with a dipper was taken inside to provide drinking water for the school. Restroom facilities were a pair of wooden "Eleanor" outhouses similar to the one described earlier. A flag pole and some playground equipment were also located on the school grounds.

The student body for 1943-1944 at Pollard School consisted of seven boys. The youngest were Kenny and Delbert Buckbee in first and second grade, respectively. In fourth grade were Darrel Trowbridge and Ed Truesdell. The sixth grader was a gentle, handsome boy named Dean Evans. Eighth graders were Dale Evans and Dwayne Trowbridge.

In all reasonable weather, the students, as well as the teacher, rode to school on their bicycles. When bad weather occurred, Mr. Truesdell and Ed,

the fourth grader, usually came by to give Marceline a ride. One of the school board members usually shoveled the snow around the school.

A typical day at school began with the teacher starting the fire in the coal furnace. Marceline's father had taught her how to bank the furnace to keep the coals burning overnight. This worked during the week, but Mondays required starting a fresh fire in the cold school. The raising of the flag at the outdoor flagpole, the pledge to the flag, and the Lord's Prayer were part of the opening exercises. Generally for each day, the teacher had to prepare for five reading classes, five math lessons, three geography texts, and two histories. Curriculum of the school day consisted of reading, arithmetic, social studies, geography, language arts, spelling, and music. The subjects included in the curriculum were mandated by the County Superintendent, and they were to be followed fairly rigidly. Seven or eight minutes were allotted for each subject at each level. Some of the grades were combined for teacher instruction.

Reading involved the five preparations and the juggling of teaching and student work. Sometimes an older student would help a younger student when the teacher was occupied with another grade level.

Math was a challenge for the new teacher. Usually over the weekend with her father, Marceline worked most of the eighth grade math problems for the following week. The math textbooks did not always have the correct answers, and Marceline claimed to have learned more math that year than at any other time in her life. The fourth grade students loved their math; they completed a math workbook before school was two-thirds over. The shy first grader found math frustrating. Rolling a ball back and forth accompanied by counting was one creative activity that the teacher devised to make math fun for him. Despite all the sugar-coated teaching techniques, Kenny seemed

to develop "arithmetic cramps". One day when Kenny's stomach pains were especially bad, Marceline had to leave the eighth graders in charge of the school while she walked to the nearest farmhouse to telephone Kenny's mother. That day, Mrs. Buckbee took Kenny home and gave him a big dose of castor oil. The home remedy seemed to offer a permanent cure for that problem because Kenny did not complain anymore about stomach pains during math.

Music instruction was another challenging subject for the country school teacher. The instruction program was planned by a music teacher hired by the county. This county music teacher visited each country school once or twice a month to plan the instruction with the regular teacher. Then it was up to the regular teacher to teach the music to the students. Beginning about third grade, the students learned to play tonettes, a simple plastic musical instrument. Marceline could play the piano to accompany the boys, but she critically judged her musical abilities to be not in the high caliber that she wished them to be.

With the depression and dust bowl days a recent memory and World War II raging, art was seen as somewhat frivolous. Construction paper activities were the usual mainstay. Before Christmas, however, a more extensive art project was planned. Plaster of Paris, molds, and paint were used to make Christmas presents for the parents. The basement table was used for this project, and the plaques turned out quite well. At Christmas, Marceline was surprised to be the recipient of several of these art pieces.

When spelling words needed to be pronounced, the teacher would stand in front of the eighth grade students and pronounce their word, then move to the sixth grader for his word, and continue down the grades. In this way spelling tests were accomplished all at the same time.

Classroom teaching aids included the following: a set of pull-down maps, a globe, a set of encyclopedias, books for the students to read, and a piano. Charts and other teaching aids were made by the teacher. A record player had been destroyed by the fire and had not been replaced.

Two evaluation visits from the county superintendent were required each year. The Rice County Superintendent was an elected official who visited each of the rural schools twice each year to rate the teacher and the school facility. When L.F. Baldwin arrived for one of the two dreaded unscheduled visits, Marceline asked him if he had any words to say to the students. He spoke to the students about the life of Eskimo children. This stall tactic gave Miss Piehler a few minutes to collect her thoughts and organize her plans before the evaluation of her teaching began. She said that he was very kind and generous with her evaluation.

A break from the weekday routine was allowed on Fridays. After lunch, the students would draw for chores to be done around the school. Dusting the room and the venetian blinds, washing the blackboard, sweeping the classroom, cleaning out the furnace, and carrying out the ashes were included in the Friday activities. When the chores were finished, a spelling bee or a math competition was conducted for the remainder of the afternoon. Marceline said that usually the chores were completed in a short time with everyone doing his part.

Recesses provided active times for the students, as well as the teacher. She was required to be on the playground at recess time, and Miss Piehler enjoyed participating in most of the outdoor recess activities. Football and a tag game called "Blackman" were two running games that the teacher and students enjoyed during recess. An unspoken but understood rule prevailed that the teacher would not be tackled, but once a fourth grader forgot. The

teacher fell very hard. She was able to get up, and she was never tackled again.

The two younger students, Kenny and Delbert Buckbee, did not always compete with the older boys in these running games. They enjoyed playing together on the slide or the teeter-totter.

An adequate snowfall added variety to recess. Sledding, snowball throwing, and "fox and geese" were activities enjoyed in the snow. School went on no matter the weather, and the boys liked to be outside for recess, so many recesses were spent participating in snow games.

Providing hot lunches for the students was another challenge for the teacher. Marceline was not an experienced cook, the cooking facilities at the school were quite limited, and the school possessed no wartime ration coupons to buy meat or sugar. The usual fare was thin, packaged soup that required no ration stamps. The students and the teacher supplemented their lunches with sandwiches from home. One noon, Mrs. "Shorty" Trowbridge brought a welcome surprise for the school. She had prepared a roast beef dinner with potatoes, gravy, and chocolate cake. It was a most welcome treat for everyone. In nice weather, the lunches were eaten on the front steps of the school. All students were expected to cooperate in the kitchen clean-up duties.

After lunch, the remainder of the noon-hour was spent doing a number of activities. Gathering kindling wood for fire starting was a useful after-lunch project. The boys and the teacher took hatchets and a child's wagon across the road to a creek. The wood was chopped and gathered by the wagonload, then it was hauled back to the school and stacked in a corner of the basement.

Since all the boys and the teacher often rode bicycles to school, the bikes were usually available for the after-lunch time. A four-mile ride around the section was another common noon activity.

A nearby stack of baled hay gave rise to another after-lunch diversion. The boys were intrigued by the glamorous fighter planes of World War II, and enjoyed pretending to be dive-bombers. They would climb to the top of the haystack and jump down to lower bales yelling an appropriate shrill yell during the dive.

In the spring, baseball replaced other noon activities. The boys practiced and the teacher again participated to fill out the team. A game was scheduled with a neighboring school. When the game was underway, the boys performance did not measure up to their usual abilities. The opposing team had girls the same age as the eighth grade boys, and the boys were distracted. Unfortunately, the boys did not win that baseball game.

The Pollard community was involved in about three events at the school during the year. In October, a Halloween party was organized; it also served as a "meet the new teacher" gathering. The teacher and the students prepared a short program and decorated the building with pumpkins and fall decorations. One of the students pestered Miss Piehler to bob for apples. Marceline thought she had a safe out by saying she would bob only if this student's grandmother would bob with her.

The night of the party the grandmother declined the challenge, but the boy's father and director of the school board, Orville Evans, offered to substitute for the grandmother. Unable to back down from the challenge, Marceline dived for her apple and was able to catch one. When she came up with her apple, she saw Mr. Evans dunk his head for a second time. He had lost his false teeth on his first try and went back under to retrieve them.

A Christmas program at the school was another opportunity to invite the community to the school. Dale Evans, one of the eighth graders, expertly played Santa. He had his own part well rehearsed, and luckily, had memorized all the other parts, as well. During the performance, a young child was convinced that Dale was the "real" Santa. The youngster interrupted Dale at several points to ask what Santa planned to bring. Dale was able to play along and answered the questions without creating a problem for the other participants in the school program. The student "Santa" displayed the admirable ability to adjust and think on his feet. Later in his life, Marceline related, this agile-minded, intelligent young man ran for the legislature. Unfortunately, he was defeated in that election.

With the help of the county music supervisor, Jean Dodson, an end-of-school program was planned along a patriotic theme. Miss Dodson was able to transpose the music to accommodate the older boys' changing voices. After the program of popular wartime music, a covered dish meal was served.

No county examinations were given at this time for eighth grade promotion to high school. The passing or failing of a student was the decision of the teacher. When Marceline was an eighth grade student, she did have to take the county examinations.

One highlight of the year was her trip to Topeka in November to attend the State Teachers Meeting. It was an exciting and beneficial experience that teachers took very seriously. In her later years of teaching, Marceline remembered a superintendent saying, "All my good teachers attend the State Teachers Meetings". She considered that a nicely put pressure point.

Another high point during that school year was the visit of her fiancée, Dean Burdette, when he was home on leave in December. The

students knew that their teacher had a boyfriend in the service, but she had not told them his name or his rank. To compensate for their lack of information, the boys referred to Dean as "the General". She did not feel that it was necessary to tell her students about his visit, and the parents also kept her secret from the boys. The students were quite disappointed when they learned later that "the General" had been home for a visit, but they had not gotten to meet him.

Miss Piehler used a camera to commemorate and document many of the activities at Pollard School. She took pictures of the dive-bombers in action, the students after a wood gathering expedition, and the boys doing their lunch clean-up duties. She photographed the school's broken water pump handle when it crystallized and broke due to the cold weather. A photo was also taken of a fourth grader who landed face-first in a mud puddle at the bottom of the sledding hill.

In later years of teaching, Marceline said that she learned to keep a scrapbook of each year of school. A scrapbook recorded the students and events of the year and kept the classes from blending together in her memory. Eighteen years worth of scrapbooks served to document and commemorate her years at Park School in Lyons.

The country teachers of the area participated in a "reading circle" group. They met to discuss a book that they had all read. This was an opportunity for the teachers to visit and give mutual support.

Another major event for Marceline that fall was a car accident that injured her back and shoulder. She suffered a pinched vertebra that caused her to miss two weeks of school. When she returned to school, her arm and fingers were still numb. During a game of "Blackman" she tagged one of the boys by grabbing his overall suspenders. The boy kept on running and

jerked her arm back into the socket. The sudden yank released the pressure on the nerve and accomplished a treatment that her doctors had not been able achieve.

Another less than pleasant occurrence was the visit of two high school boys from the area who skipped school one Friday and came to harass the new teacher. Miss Piehler seated them like expected guests and invited them to say a few words to prepare the two eighth graders for the transition to high school the following year. One student would not speak, but the other did manage to mumble a little about high school. They both seemed very ready to leave after the students applauded the remarks.

Marceline suspected there was a connection between those two high school students and the disappearance of her bicycle around Halloween. She left her bicycle in the wash house at the Rickard's farm on Friday afternoon. When she went to get her bike on Monday morning, the bike was missing. It was tied to the top of a silo on the Rickard's farm. Miss Piehler was not too disturbed about the situation, but she had to walk to school for several days. When her father heard about the problem, he visited the machine shop and mentioned that the sheriff would need to be notified if the bike was not quickly returned. The bike was back in its place after the next weekend.

Marceline expected that the two weeks missed early in the year because of her injury would be made up at the end of the year. Early in April the school board met with her to find out how the boys were progressing with their course of studies. They wondered if the year could be completed by the end of April when school usually ended. The boys were needed for field work on the farms. The school board offered to forgive the two weeks and pay the teacher in full. The teacher and parents knew that this could be accomplished because these students were capable, country youngsters.

In July of 1944, Miss Piehler married Dean Burdette. She recalled that one of her former Pollard students attended the wedding and cried. The school board offered Marceline a raise to return to Pollard School the next year, but she signed a contract to teach for a larger salary in a two-teacher school in the area.

That first teaching position had been an educational experience for Marceline. She was certain that she learned more than her students. Many of her teaching philosophies were developed during that year. These children were well-behaved students who had discipline at home. She did not recall ever having to use any physical punishment, but she did not let them get by with anything. Marceline hated to see a teacher yelling at students. Spanking and yelling showed that the teacher had given up.

She always tried to work with the positive qualities of the students. One year-end activity that Marceline conducted was to go from student to student and tell them the things that she liked and admired about them. This let them know that they were appreciated for their good qualities.

Through her years of teaching, Marceline calculated that she taught nearly a thousand students. She tried to find something special about each of those students to love and remember. One of the joys of teaching for so many years was encountering former students when they were older. Now these students were her friends, and they would relate to her on that level. When a former student asked if she remembered them, often she smiled to herself and was relieved that the student was not able to see into her memories to know the things that she actually did remember about them.

The school at Pollard quit being a school five or ten years after Marceline taught there. The building was torn down or moved, and the land was probably returned to its original owner. Four of the seven students from

the 1943-1944 year at Pollard School were already deceased when this interview was conducted.

All of the one-teacher country schools in Rice County have been closed for many years. Marceline related that she felt that represented progress. She was happy to share her memories of her one-room country school teaching days, and she hoped that those memories benefited other educators.